

## Chapter 2

# How the "Marxists" Buried Marx

## Part 2, Pages 25-48

Including "Karl Marx and the Origins of 'Marxism'"

### 'Dialectical Materialism'

The Stalinist movement has ensured that the phrase 'dialectical materialism' is widely associated with Karl Marx. It had been used earlier, but not in Marx's lifetime. In the preface to his 1908 book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin declared: 'Marx and Engels scores of times termed their philosophical views dialectical materialism.' He was so sure about this, that he felt no need to give any references.

In fact, there is not one! Marx never employed the phrase in any of his writings. The term 'dialectical materialism' was introduced in 1891 by Plekhanov, in an article in Kautsky's *Neue Zeit*. He thought wrongly, I believe — that he was merely adapting it from Engels's usage in *Anti-Duhring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach*. This was not just a matter of terminology. He was intent on combating the tendency of the populists (*narodniki*) to put subjective revolutionary will at the foundation of their idea of the Russian Revolution. In its place, Plekhanov installed a materialism which left no room for will at all and this is what he foisted on to Marx. Many years later (1920), Lenin wrote: 'Bolshevism arose in 1903 on a very firm foundation of Marxist theory.' Alas, it did nothing of the kind.

Alexander Bogdanov (1873-1928) was one of Lenin's closest collaborators and an enthusiastic advocate of the basic ideas of *What is to be Done?* Along with other Party members, Bogdanov was also an enthusiastic follower of Ernst Mach (1838-1916) a leading Austrian physicist, philosopher and historian of science, who was concerned with the methodological problems arising from contemporary

developments in physics. Bogdanov thought that his ideas offered a 'scientific' alternative to 'dialectics' as a foundation for socialism.

Mach's 'theory of knowledge' was based on sensation — something like the scepticism of the eighteenth-century Scot, David Hume. Lenin, following Plekhanov, later came to see it as an attack on 'Marxist orthodoxy'. This, they believed, was founded on 'materialism', which began with the objective existence of the world, independent of what anyone thinks about it.

But that came later. Trotsky recalls how, when he came to London in 1902 (after his escape from Siberia), he told Lenin about his discussions in prison:

*In philosophy we had been much impressed with Bogdanov's book, which combined Marxism with the theory of knowledge put forward by Mach and Avenarius. Lenin also thought, at the time, that Bogdanov's theories were right. 'I am not a philosopher,' he said with a slightly timorous expression, 'but Plekhanov denounces Bogdanov's philosophy as a disguised sort of idealism'. A few years later, Lenin dedicated a big volume to the discussion of Mach and Avenarius; his criticism of their theories was fundamentally identical with that voiced by Plekhanov.*

Between 1904 and 1906, Bogdanov's three-volume *Empirio-Monism* appeared in Moscow, while its author remained Lenin's second-in command in the Bolshevik faction. After the defeat of the 1905 uprising, all factions of the RSDLP inevitably faced great political difficulties. One expression of these was the renewal of interest in Mach's philosophy of science. (Another was the effort of Lunacharsky (1875-1933) to build a secular 'socialist religion'.)

In 1905, Mach's *Knowledge and Error* had appeared. The following year, Machist members of both Menshevik and Bolshevik factions combined to issue *Studies in the Philosophy of Marxism*. In 1908, a Russian edition of Mach's earlier *The Analysis of Sensations* appeared, with an enthusiastic Introduction by Bogdanov. Lenin now decided that these ideas represented a fundamental attack on Marxism and were thus embarrassing for the Bolshevik faction.

For a long time, he held his tongue to avoid a split among the Bolsheviks, and stood by an agreement on the editorial board of the Bolshevik newspaper *Proletary* that it should remain neutral on philosophical issues. Plekhanov, now leading Lenin's Menshevik opponents, was delighted at Lenin's embarrassment. He made the most of the accusation that Lenin's group were 'subjectivists' like old *narodnik* terrorists. Attacking 'Lenin and the Nietzscheans and Machists who surround him', Plekhanov gleefully alleged that those who 'talk about the **seizure of power** by the Social-

Democrats in the now impending ***bourgeois revolution*** . . . are returning to the political standpoint of the late “*Narodnaya Volya* trend”.

For a time a perplexed Lenin considered proposing a struggle jointly with Plekhanov against both Menshevik and Bolshevik Machists. Then Lenin broke the agreement with the Bolshevik Machists, with whom he now had important political disagreements. Borrowing a large number of books on philosophy from the Menshevik-Machist Valentinov (1890-1975) — one of the targets for his attack — Lenin began work on *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, and spent the best part of 1908 on it, in Geneva, London and Paris. (Valentinov reports that Lenin returned all his books when the job was done.) Under Stalin, this book became the unquestionable source for ‘dialectical materialism’.

In *The Development of the Monist View of History* (1894), Plekhanov had been rather cautious. The Machist controversy had not yet begun and ‘revisionism’ had not yet shown its hand.

*Materialism . . . tries to explain psychic phenomena by these or those qualities of matter, by this or that organisation of the human, or in more general terms, of the animal body.... That is all that can be said about materialism in general.*

In the preface to his *Essays on the History of Materialism* (1896), Plekhanov had brushed aside all questions about the ‘theory of knowledge’:

*Since I do not number myself among the adherents of the theoretico-scholasticism that is such vogue today, I have had no intention of dwelling on this absolutely secondary question.*

But in 1908, Plekhanov answered an open challenge from Bogdanov with his booklet *Materialismus Militans*. In his usual lofty manner, he attacked the superficiality of Bogdanov’s arguments. For Plekhanov and Lenin, the way to combat philosophical attacks on Marxism in the International was to underline the continuity between the views of Marx and Engels and those of earlier materialists, and they both thought this meant stressing how ‘materialist’ they were. So, in *Materialismus Militans*, Plekhanov gave a ‘definition of matter’:

*In contrast to ‘spirit’, we call ‘matter’ that which acts on our sense-organs and arouses in us various sensations.... We call material objects (bodies) those objects that exist independently of our consciousness and, acting on our senses, arouse in us certain sensations which in turn underlie our*

*notions of the material world, that is, of those same material objects as well as of their reciprocal relationships.*

Plekhanov goes on to identify matter with Kant's 'things-in-themselves', while denying Kant's contention that 'things-in-themselves' were essentially unknowable. Does that mean that our sensations give us direct knowledge of matter? No, says Plekhanov. What we get from our senses is a 'hieroglyph', which has then to be decoded by thought.

Plekhanov's 'definition' of matter has an honourable history, but not in the works of either Marx or Engels. That matter is 'given to us in our sensations' had certainly been the view of the old materialists, whose writings were well known to Plekhanov. He quotes the great eighteenth-century mechanical materialist Holbach, for whom 'matter is what acts in one way or another on our senses'.

But these were bourgeois thinkers, in the sense that they took human beings to be discrete, reasoning atoms. For them, sensations were the physical traces left by the impact of external bodies in these individuals. Knowledge was thus implicitly reducible to the passive responses of individual citizens, who were assumed to exist outside society.

Plekhanov had tried to demonstrate that Bernstein's return to Kant (or rather to the neo-Kantian version of Kant) was part of a general adaptation to bourgeois society. But, in effect, so was his version of eighteenth-century materialism. In *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin also gives a definition of matter, very much like Plekhanov's:

*Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to man by his sensations, and which is copied, photographed and reflected by our sensations while existing independently of them.*

Characteristically, to show that he is a more radical philosopher than Plekhanov, Lenin sharpens his materialism. He insists that sensations are 'copies' of material reality. The theory of 'hieroglyphs', declares Lenin, is an impermissible concession to the Kantians and positivists: 'To regard our sensations as images of the external world, to recognise objective truth, to hold the materialist theory of knowledge — these are all one and the same thing' (By the way, Plekhanov later withdrew his use of the term 'hieroglyph', saying it had been 'a mistake'.)

Lenin's 'copy theory' — and it is hard to see just what he meant by it — was designed to root out the last traces of idealism and subjectivism. But, in fact, it left

‘dialectical materialism’ perched precariously on the view that ‘objective truth’ is founded on individual ‘sensation’.

In *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin is sometimes vaguely aware of these weaknesses, but on the fundamental issues he is still not able to break free from Plekhanov’s philosophical tutelage. When, twenty years later, Lenin’s works had been transformed from a living struggle for clarification into religious dogma, this provided a basis for the philosophy of the bureaucrats.

Lenin did emphasise Engels’s remark in *Ludwig Feuerbach* that materialism ‘has to change its form’ ‘with every epoch-making discovery even in the sphere of natural science’. But *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, with all its inconsistencies, itself became fixed as a definitive text, a central part of the canon of ‘dialectical materialism’. This dogmatic outlook was, of course, obligatory for Stalinists; but those who followed Trotsky in his battle against Stalinism were never able to challenge it and so free themselves from its influence.

Lenin’s political conceptions were demonstrated in practice to be diametrically opposed to those of his philosophical mentor. But he was never able to clarify the philosophical foundation of this vital difference, or his attitude to Plekhanov’s work as a whole. While denouncing Plekhanov’s political treachery in 1905, his attitude to the World War in 1914 and his support for Kerensky’s Provisional Government in 1917, he never ceased to pay tribute to Plekhanov’s philosophical work and never broke with it openly. (Interestingly, Bogdanov’s views actually crop up again in the history of Bolshevism, through their influence on Bukharin.)

### **Lenin versus ‘Orthodoxy’**

Until August 1914, Lenin supported the theoretical authority of Karl Kautsky without fundamental disagreement. Although the Bolsheviks had fought against Georgi Plekhanov’s political line for a decade, his writings on philosophy continued to be accepted by them as the genuine continuation of the work of Marx and Engels, with only minor amendments.

In the early part of the century, as the acknowledged leader of the International, Kautsky, supported by Plekhanov, had signed, and sometimes written, resolutions pledging working-class action against imperialist war. Then, in August 1914, these two became supporters of opposing empires in the imperialist war. When the German Social Democrats voted for the Kaiser’s War Budget in the Reichstag, only Karl Liebknecht’s voice protested. Kautsky, the ‘pope of Marxism’, found quotations from Marx and Engels to justify some kind of compromise. The Second

International, as the universally accepted organisation of workers' parties, was finished.

This evolution of the leader of Marxist 'orthodoxy' came as no great surprise to Rosa Luxemburg. She had broken with Kautsky four years earlier, in a dispute in which Lenin had sided with Kautsky. Now, she brilliantly analysed the break-up of the International, and with her cothinkers fought heroically to reaffirm the principles of proletarian internationalism. In 1919, she was to meet a brutal death at the hands of thugs encouraged by the Social Democratic leaders.

But to Lenin, Kautsky's 1914 betrayal was totally unexpected. Shocked by this development, he determined to discover all its implications and its objective basis. He began to probe every aspect of the ideas of the International, including especially his own — although he rarely says so.

In Switzerland at the start of the war, he turned to the study of philosophy and especially to Hegel. In his 'Notebooks' of 1914-15, it is possible to trace how this study of Hegel's *Science of Logic* and parts of his *History of Philosophy* became more and more important to him as it went on. The Stalinised version of history has naturally denied the radical nature of the shift in his thought.

In 1908, in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin had defended 'orthodoxy', leaning heavily on Plekhanov's work and quoting Kautsky as an authority. But in his 1915 'Notebooks' he writes about *Capital*: 'Half a century later, none of the Marxists understood Marx!!' Lenin's startlingly self-critical statement must not be dismissed as rhetoric. He was trying to use Hegel to deepen and clarify the theoretical and political break with Kautsky and Plekhanov which he belatedly recognised as essential.

'Orthodox Marxists' — myself among them! — have twisted and turned, trying to reconcile Lenin's 'Notebooks' with *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, written only six years earlier. Of course, it can't be done. For example, in 1908 Lenin had identified idealist philosophy with 'clerical obscurantism'. Seven years on, he wrote: 'Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism.' In his earlier book, his disagreements with Plekhanov were secondary. In the *Notebooks* he writes:

*Concerning the question of the criticism of modern Kantianism, Machism, etc.: Plekhanov criticises Kantianism (and agnosticism in general) more from a vulgar-materialist standpoint than from a dialectical-materialist standpoint, insofar as he merely rejects their views a limine [from the threshold].*

And yet Lenin was never able to complete his break with the philosophical ideas he had learnt from Plekhanov.

## Lenin and the State

In July 1917, Lenin sent a note to Kamenev (1883-1936) which reveals a great deal about the real story of the development of Marxism:

*Comrade Kamenev, in strict confidence, if I should be killed [the Russian original actually reads more like 'bumped off', or 'done in'], I beg you to publish a notebook with the title 'Marxism and the State' (it has been left in safe keeping in Stockholm). Bound, with a blue cover. There are collected all the quotations from Marx and Engels, as well as those of Kautsky's controversy with Pannekoek. Also a series of remarks and reviews. It has only to be edited. I think this work could be published within a week. I think it is very important, because it isn't only Kautsky and Plekhanov who have gone off the rails. [My emphasis]. All this on one condition; that it is in strictest confidence between ourselves.*

When Lenin began to write up this material in *The State and Revolution* — he never finished the work — he was surprised to find how far the views of Marx and Engels had been forgotten. This was especially striking when it came to the question of the destiny of the state in the course of the transition to communism, following a proletarian revolution.

For instance, Lenin quotes, from *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx's statement that 'the working class ... will substitute for the old bourgeois society an association which will preclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power proper'. And in the *Communist Manifesto* he finds what he ironically calls 'one of the forgotten words of Marxism':

*... the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy. The proletariat will use its political power to wrest by degrees all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the state, ie, of the proletariat organised as the ruling class.*

It is interesting to note that, in *The State and Revolution*, Lenin is quite clear that the phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which Marx and Engels used on some occasions, is equivalent precisely to this idea: that the proletariat will organise itself as the ruling class. Then, the state will begin at once to 'wither away'.

Lenin notes especially the development which Marx was able to make as a result of the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871. Now he could be clear that 'the precondition for any real people's revolution on the Continent' was 'no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic military machine from one hand to another, but to *smash* it'.

What was to replace this 'machine'? Lenin recalls that Marx saw the form of this replacement in the way the Commune organised itself.

1. The standing army was to be suppressed and replaced by 'the armed people'.
2. The people's representatives were to be elected by universal suffrage, subject to recall at any time and paid the wages of a workman. Judges were also to be elected.
3. Instead of an executive, inaccessible to electors, 'the Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time'.
4. Local communes would take over many of the functions of the central government.

When Marx spoke of the violent overthrow of the existing order and the establishment of proletarian dictatorship, this is what he had in mind. In 1917, Lenin agreed with him, seeing the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies as the Russian equivalent of the Commune, as 'a democratic republic of the Commune type'. But, as the brutality and desperation of the wars of intervention and the Civil War swept away all such notions, these ideas were once more forgotten.

Perhaps with the exception of the *April Theses* of a few months earlier, Lenin had never written anything like *The State and Revolution*. As a follower of Plekhanov on nearly all theoretical issues, he had accepted his teacher's crude interpretation of the phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which had been written into the programmes of both Menshevik and Bolshevik wings of the RSDLP. As we have seen, it was Plekhanov who introduced the notion that this 'dictatorship' was to be exercised by a devoted minority, in a state form opposed to that of 'democracy'.

Lenin in 1914-17 was partially rediscovering Marx's notion of communism, self-critically trying to develop his ideas in the light of the collapse of the International. Returning to the most fundamental issues, he was grappling with their falsification in the movement of which he had been a part. These books are permeated with this deeper understanding of the way forward for humanity to liberate itself through the world socialist revolution. However, they represent the start of work which was never continued, and then forgotten.



Even after the political outlooks of Kautsky and Plekhanov were clear for all to see, and Lenin was engaged in defending what he thought were the ideas of Marx and Engels against them, he never published a word which challenged their **philosophical** outlooks. Even when he did begin to see the importance of Hegel for Marx's thinking, and glimpsed the superficiality of Plekhanov's discussion of this, he could not break free from his mentor's influence. After 1917, there was no opportunity to continue this advance or consider its significance. Later, the mythological picture of Lenin which Stalinism inflicted on the world prevented any objective assessment being made.

Indeed, as far as I can make out, Lenin hardly breathed a word about his reading of Hegel to anyone else. I know of two exceptions. One was in the article *On the Significance of Militant Materialism* (1922), and even there, he makes a favourable mention of Plekhanov. The other reference was in the Trade Union discussion of 1920-21, mentioned on pages 31-2. There, too, Lenin was unable to talk about philosophy without invoking the name of Plekhanov.

*Let me add in parenthesis for the benefit of young Party members that you **cannot** hope to become a **real**, intelligent Communist without making a study — and I mean **study** — of all of Plekhanov's philosophical writings, because nothing better has been written on Marxism anywhere in the world.*

He even adds a footnote calling for a special edition of Plekhanov's works, including an index.

What I am trying to show is that the philosophical bases of Marx's thought, lost in the days of the Second International, were never rediscovered in the Third. Even before Stalin began his 'revision' of Marxism — 'not with the theoretician's pen but with the heel of the GPU' the fundamental ideas of Marx had been buried.

## **Engels and 'Marxism'**

Frederick Engels worked closely with Marx from 1844, until Marx's death in 1883. From then until his own death in 1895, Engels was the leading figure in the rapidly growing movement which became the Second International.

It is quite common to hear Engels blamed exclusively for the vulgarisation of Marx's ideas, but I think this is too easy an option. It is true that some of Engels's formulations do lend themselves to the spread of several inadequate conceptions. In particular, the idea that *Capital* was a book about 'capitalist economics' owes

more than a little to Engels's *Anti-Duhring*, his treatment of Volumes 2 and 3, and to his authorisation of the appalling English translation of Volume 1.

However, compared with the later perversions of Marx's work, Engels's errors are insignificant. By the end of his life, he was almost entirely isolated amidst a sea of opportunism, and fighting a lone battle for the concepts Marx had originated, as he understood them. His followers certainly made use of the weaknesses of his writings in the construction of their 'Marxism'. However, in this process, these works, which played an enormous part in the popularisation of Marx's ideas, were misinterpreted nearly as badly as Marx's own writings.

Engels wrote *Anti-Duhring* in Marx's lifetime, and it rapidly became one of the most popular theoretical works in the socialist movement. (Parts were later issued as the pamphlet *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*.) In it, he wrote: 'Marx and I were pretty well the only people to rescue conscious dialectics from German idealist philosophy and apply it in the materialist conception of nature and history.'

Such remarks, made in texts designed for popular reading, do not say everything which Marx thought on these issues. But they in no way conform to the Plekhanovite picture. The closest Engels comes to speaking about 'dialectical materialism' is this:

*Old materialism looked upon all previous history as a crude heap of irrationality and violence; modern materialism sees in it the process of evolution of humanity, and aims at discovering the laws thereof. With the French of the eighteenth century, and even with Hegel, the conception obtained of nature as a whole moving in narrow circles and for ever immutable.... Modern materialism embraces the more recent discoveries of natural science, according to which nature also has its history in time.... In both cases, it [modern materialism] is essentially dialectic, and no longer needs any philosophy standing above the other sciences.*

This passage may not be written with Engels's usual clarity, but it gives no support to the idea that 'modern materialism' is just the 'old materialism' with an extra 'dialectical' flourish. Nor is there any question of 'applying' dialectic independently to nature and to history. Rather, Engels is arguing quite the opposite: the 'dialectic' of Hegel has been refounded on a materialist basis.

Engels's incomplete manuscripts on the natural sciences were written in the 1870s, but published only in 1925, under the title *Dialectics of Nature*. The 'Marxists' then absorbed them into their world-outlook. Despite the fairly tentative way that Engels wrote about the 'laws of dialectics', they were turned into tablets of stone.

In 1888, Engels wrote a review article, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, and this became another source for 'dialectical materialism'. However, it was when Plekhanov translated it into Russian, and wrote extensive explanatory notes for it, that it formed the shape in which it became a major part of the 'Marxist' canon.

This is how Engels posed the question of materialism:

*The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of more recent philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being.... The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in one form or another — and among the philosophers, Hegel, for example, this creation often becomes still more intricate than in Christianity comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism.*

Later in this book he contrasts the views of Marx and himself with those of Hegel:

*It was resolved to comprehend the real world — nature and history — just as it presents itself to everyone who approaches it free from preconceived idealist crotchets. It was decided mercilessly to sacrifice every idealist crotchet which could not be brought into harmony with the facts conceived on their own and not in a fantastic interconnection. And materialism means nothing more than this.*

*We comprehended the concepts in our head once more materialistically — as images of real things instead of regarding the real things as images of this or that stage of the absolute concept. Thus dialectics reduced itself to the science of the general laws of motion, both of the external world and of human thought — both sets of laws which are identical in substance, but differ in their expression in so far as the human mind can apply them consciously, while in nature and also up to now for the most part in human history, these laws assert themselves unconsciously, in the form of external necessity, in the midst of an endless series of seeming accidents. In this way the dialectic of ideas became merely the conscious reflection of the dialectical movement of the real world, and thus Hegel's dialectic was put on its head, or rather, from its head, on which it was standing, it was put on its feet.*

I do not believe that this is the same as Plekhanov's 'dialectical materialism' at all. For Engels, 'laws of history' have 'asserted themselves unconsciously' only 'up to now'.

In any case, Engels deserves to be considered as an independent thinker and not looked at as if his writings were merely a part of Marx's output. Since it would take me too far away from my present purpose to undertake this study here, in this book I shall restrict myself almost entirely to Marx's own writings.

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From: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-cyril/works/millenni/smith2.htm>

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## *Chapter 2, How the "Marxists" Buried Marx, cont'd*

# **Karl Marx and the Origins of 'Marxism'**

### **'Marxism' in France and Germany**

In the 1870s, socialism revived from the defeat of the Paris Commune and the disappearance of the First International. Mass workers' organisations began to appear in many countries, often under leaderships which tried to base their activity on what they thought were Marx's ideas. *Capital*, Vol. 1, began to find a popular audience in the labour movement.

Of course, Marx and Engels welcomed such developments and worked might and main to foster them. But they carried a price. Opportunist tendencies, which sometimes accompanied the appearance of parliamentary representatives of such groups and parties, were bound up with a vulgarisation of the theory of socialism.

Marx's relations with his French 'followers' are notorious. Everyone knows that, when he denied he was a 'Marxist', he said it in French and meant it. The remark was mainly directed against his future son-in-law Paul Lafargue (1842-1911) and some of his friends. Lafargue worked closely with Marx and Engels in building the French Party. But, while he fervently supported Marx's basic philosophical ideas, he imagined they had something to do with what he called 'economic materialism'.

Lafargue's political work, in the course of which he made great sacrifices, unfortunately reflected his theory. In the early 1870s, Lafargue tried surreptitiously to promote some kind of reconciliation between Marx and Blanqui. Later, in 1888, Engels had great difficulty prising him away from the idea of a rapprochement between the socialists and the demagogic proto-fascist General Boulanger.

Marx and Engels themselves were particularly concerned with the German Party, where similar tendencies appeared in the 1870s. The problems here were bound up with the division of the labour movement between the General German Workers' Union, founded by Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864) in 1863, and the Social

Democratic Workers' Party. The latter, formed in 1869 at Eisenach by Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826-1900) and August Bebel (1840-1913), was a section of the International and was generally associated with Marx and Engels.

In 1875, without telling Marx and Engels and even without informing Bebel, who was in prison, Liebknecht set up a unification of the two groups, giving fundamental concessions of principle to the Lassalleans. The unification Congress at Gotha set up the German Social Democratic Party and agreed a programme which embodied nearly of the watchwords of Lassalleanism.

Marx's denunciation of this document, one of his most important theoretical statements, was suppressed by the leaders of the new organisation. In 1891, Engels had still to fight Kautsky to get the fifteen-year-old *Critique of the Gotha Programme* published in *Neue Zeit*. He only succeeded after agreeing to the deletion of some of Marx's more vigorous invective. Liebknecht's *Vorwärts* - which Engels knew would never publish the document - then published a reply to the dead Marx, issued by the Party's parliamentary group.

Until the end of his life, Marx remained a bitter critic of the opportunism of the German leaders, threatening from time to time to break with them publicly. In 1879, in their so-called '*Circular Letter*', Marx and Engels mercilessly lashed the new type of Marxist leadership they saw emerging. The effect of their criticism was precisely nil. After Marx's death, the German leaders' treatment of the ageing Engels was even worse. They printed his work only with opportunist omissions and amendments, and, while freely making use of his prestigious name, they effectively cut him off from the International.

## **Marx and the Russians**

Russia has, inevitably, loomed large in this account of the development of Marxism, so it is important to clarify the relationship of Marx himself to the origins of 'Marxism' in that country. As is well known, the hostility of Marx and Engels to Russia in their earlier political work was so deep that it sometimes approached anti-Slav racism. Tsarism was seen as inspiring the most reactionary forces in Europe. (For example, Marx was convinced that Lord Palmerston was an agent of the Tsar.) Marx detested those, like A. I. Herzen (1812-1870) and M. A. Bakunin (1814-1876), who argued that there was a specific Russian national road to socialism, arising from some special qualities of the 'Russian spirit'.

When socialist ideas developed in Russia, they had nothing to do with Marx. The devoted *narodniki* were a small group of intellectuals who set themselves the task of 'going to the people' (*narod*). They aimed to bring about the destruction of the

Tsarist autocracy and the liberation of the oppressed peasant masses. If they succeeded, they believed, Russia would never have to pass through the hell of capitalist development. To gain their goal, some of them engaged in heroic acts of violence against leading figures of the autocratic state. They hoped to destroy Tsarism by the use of the bomb and the revolver.

Those, on the contrary, who thought that the development of Russian capitalism was inevitable, called themselves 'Marxists'. Russia would be forced along a similar path to that followed by countries of Western Europe, they believed. A proletarian movement would develop in the towns and the Russian bourgeoisie would take the power in society. Organising the workers, the Marxists would be ready at some later stage to lead a socialist revolution.

But when would that be, and what would they do in the meantime? Most of the subsequent conflicts within the Russian Marxist movement were over how the struggle for socialism would relate to the democratic movement against Tsarism. In the first edition of *Capital*, in 1867, the following footnote appeared:

*If, on the European continent, influences of capitalist production which destroy the human species ... were to continue to develop hand in hand with competition in the sizes of national armies, state security issues ... etc, then rejuvenation of Europe may become possible with the use of a whip and through forced mixture with the Kalmyks, as Herzen ... has so emphatically foretold. (This gentleman with an ornate style of writing - to remark in passing - has discovered 'Russian' communism not inside Russia but instead in the work of Haxthausen, a councillor of the Prussian government.)*

But, unlike some of his followers, Marx was always prepared to reconsider his views in the light of new developments. As early as 11 January 1860, he had written, in a letter to Engels, about the movement among the lesser Russian nobility concluding: 'thus the "social" movement has begun in West and East.'

A far bigger shift in his thinking was on the way. On 12 October 1868, he wrote to Kugelmann:

*A few days ago a Petersburg publisher surprised me with the news that a Russian translation of Das Kapital is now being printed. It is an irony of fate that the Russians whom I have fought for twenty-five years, not only in German, but in French and English, have always been my 'patrons'.*

(Actually, Marx was a little too optimistic. The first translation of his book into any other language was certainly in preparation, but it did not begin to appear until March 1872, continuing in instalments until 1875.)

In 1869-70, he devoted a lot of his time to teaching himself Russian, and was soon reading Flerovsky's book on the condition of the Russian peasantry. On 12 February 1870 he wrote to Engels about it: From his book it follows that the present conditions in Russia are no longer tenable, that the emancipation of the serfs, of course, only hastened the process of disintegration and that a frightful social revolution is now imminent.

In March, Marx could tell Engels that the colony of exiled Russian revolutionaries in Geneva had formed themselves into a section of the International, and that- to his amazement- they had asked him to be their representative on the General Council. By 1871 he was studying some of the work of Chernyshevsky on the *obshchina*, the Russian peasant commune. Ten years on, he could count 200 books in Russian on his shelves.

Following the defeat of the Paris Commune, Marx worked on the French translation of *Capital*, and on preparing the second German edition. Important changes from the first edition were introduced, and several of them concern Russia. The footnote about Herzen, quoted above, was deleted. The famous 'Afterword' to the second German edition includes a tribute to Chernyshevsky's 'masterly' work on J. S. Mill. Marx goes on to refer to the Russian translation of his book, and writes at length about the helpful comments of two Russian professors, N. Sieber and I. I. Kaufman.

The German editions explain how, during the 'primitive' accumulation of capital, the expropriation of the peasants in different countries 'runs through its different phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods'. In the French edition, however, Marx rewrote this paragraph to say that this 'expropriation ... has been accomplished in a final form only in England . . . but all the other countries of Western Europe are going through the same movement'. This limitation of the analysis in *Capital* to **Western** Europe was quite deliberate.

In 1877 war broke out between Turkey and Russia. Marx and Engels were very excited at the possibility that a defeat of the Tsar's forces would open the way for revolutionary struggles to break out. Marx writes to Sorge:

*This crisis is a new turning point for the history of Europe. Russia - I have studied the situation in this country on the basis of official and non official sources in the Russian language - has for a long period been on the brink of revolution.... The revolution this time starts in the East, that same East*



*which we have so far regarded as the invincible support for the reserve of counter-revolution.*

The victory of Russia over the Turks the following March came as a grave disappointment

Marx was, of course, particularly concerned with the issue of landownership in Russia and the destiny of the communally owned peasant land, the *obshchina*, and this was also the centre of the disputes going on among the Russian socialists

In 1877 an individual called Zhukovsky had attacked Marx in a St Petersburg journal, *Vestnik Evropa* (*European Messenger*), denouncing in particular that footnote reference to Herzen in the first edition of *Capital*, quoted on page 53. Sieber sprang to Marx's defence in the journal *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* ('*Notes of the Fatherland*'), and a comment also appeared by the editor, the *narodnik* Mikhailovskiy (1842-1904). Marx drafted a reply to this latter contribution, although it seems never to have been sent.

Drawing attention to the changes he had made in the second edition of *Capital*, Marx responded sharply

*My critic ... absolutely insists on transforming my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of the general course fatally imposed on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves placed, in order to arrive at this economic formation which assures the greatest expansion of the productive forces of social labour . . . But success will never come with the master-key of a general historico-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical.*

### **Marx and the 'Terrorists'**

The illegal populist organisation *Zemlya i Volya* (*Land and Freedom*) had been formed in 1873. Largely consisting of intellectuals, its theoretical outlook was in no sense homogeneous. In 1879 it split and two new organisations emerged. The larger, *Narodnaya Volya* (*People's Will*), was responsible for renewed terrorist activity, although it did not avoid work among both the urban and rural masses.

Opposing them, Russian exiles in Switzerland formed *Cherny Peredel* (*Black Repartition*). The 'peredeltsy' doubted that the *obshchina* had a future, or could form the basis for Russian socialism. Instead of individual attacks on the personnel of Tsarism, they called for more work among the masses in both town and country.

It was this latter group, led by the young revolutionary G. Plekhanov, which was to transform itself in 1882 into the germ of Russian 'Marxism'. However, it is here that myth and reality part company: contrary to the 'orthodox' account, Marx's sympathies were entirely with the 'terrorists'! In February 1880, Lev Hartmann (1850-1913), who had escaped from Russia following an unsuccessful attempt to blow up the Tsar's train, came to London. To the surprise of Hyndman, for one, Marx received the Russian 'terrorist' warmly and gave him every possible assistance.

In November, 1880 Marx received a letter from the Executive Committee of Narodskaya Volya, together with its Programme. The letter warmly praised *Capital* - 'it has become the daily reading of educated people' - and announced that Hartmann had been given the task of maintaining contact with Marx: 'We consider ourselves fortunate to have this chance of expressing to you, most esteemed citizen, the feelings of deep respect of the entire Russian social-revolutionary party.'

After studying these documents, Marx ceased referring to their authors as 'the terrorist party'.

And what of the other group, the one from which Russian Marxism sprang? In a letter to Sorge in November 1880, Marx writes of them:

*These persons - most (not all of them) - who left Russia voluntarily, constitute the so-called party of propaganda as opposed to the terrorists who risk their lives. (In order to carry on propaganda in Russia - they move to Geneva! What a quid pro quo!) These gentlemen are against all political-revolutionary action. Russia is to make a somersault into the anarchist-communist-atheist millennium! Meanwhile they are preparing for this leap with the most tedious doctrinairism, whose so-called principles are being hawked about the street ever since the late Bakunin.*

It appears that Marx was not clear about the political character of the Geneva group, but he certainly didn't like them.

In March 1881, *narodism* achieved its greatest success, when Tsar Alexander II was blown to pieces. Marx and Engels were delighted. When the conspirators were tried and sentenced to death, Marx was full of praise for their conduct before the court. Writing to his daughter Jenny, he declared that the defendants were 'sterling people through and through ... whose *modus operandi* is a specifically Russian and historically inevitable method about which there is no more need to moralise - for or against - than about the earthquake in Chios'.

In stark contrast, he repeated to his daughter his opinions on Plekhanov's 'Black Repartition' group. (He was still unclear just who they were.)

*The Genevans have in fact long been trying to persuade Europe that it is really **they** who direct the movement in Russia; now when this **lie**, spread by themselves, is seized upon by Bismark & Co., and becomes dangerous to them, they declare the opposite and vainly attempt to convince the world of their innocence. Actually, they are mere doctrinaires, confused anarchist socialists, and their influence on the Russian theatre of war is zero.*

In the same letter, by the way, Marx also gives his highly uncomplimentary opinions of Kautsky, then in London: 'He is a mediocrity, with a small-minded outlook ... he belongs by nature to the tribe of philistines.' Clearly, Karl Marx did not just disagree with the 'Marxists' - he couldn't stand them!

## **State and Commune**

Vera Zasulich (1849-1919) was renowned as a revolutionary, honoured by socialists both for her devotion to the Revolution and her saintly character. In 1878 she had shot and wounded the St Petersburg police prefect, because he had been responsible for the flogging of a narod-ist prisoner. Zasulich was acquitted by the jury in a celebrated trial. In February 1881 she sent Marx a famous letter. It asked for the author of *Capital* to give his opinion on the major issue dividing Russian socialists: the future of the peasant commune.

*Either the rural commune, freed of exorbitant tax demands, payment to the nobility and arbitrary administration, is capable of developing in a socialist direction, that is, gradually organising its production and distribution on a collectivist basis. In this case the revolutionary socialist must devote all his energies to the liberation and development of the commune.*

*If however, the commune is destined to perish, all that remains for the socialist, as such, is more or less unfounded calculations as to how many decades it will take for the peasant's land to pass into the hands of the bourgeoisie, and how many centuries it will take for capitalism in Russia to reach something like the level of development already attained in Western Europe. Their task will then be to conduct propaganda solely among the urban workers, while these workers will be continually drowned in the peasant mass which, following the dissolution of the commune, will be thrown on to the streets of the large towns in search of a wage.*

*Nowadays, we often hear it said that the rural commune is an archaic form condemned to perish by history, scientific socialism and, in short, everything above debate. Those who preach such a view call themselves your disciples par excellence: 'Marxists'. Their strongest argument is often: 'Marx said so'.*

These lines read curiously, coming as they do from someone who was a close supporter of Plekhanov, the leader of these very 'Marxists', and who remained so for the rest of her life.

Marx made four long drafts for his reply, taking a great deal of trouble over them. And yet, after all his preparatory work, the reply Marx actually sent was, as he described it himself, a 'short note'. He begins by apologising for this brevity, saying that he had been ill. Our knowledge of the care he had taken over the drafts makes it look as if this illness was a diplomatic one! Another remark gives us a clue about his real political motivation: 'Some months ago, I already promised a text on the same subject to the St Petersburg Committee.'

So the cool tone of his reply is explained by his preference for *Narodnaya Volya* over the group of Zasulich and Plekhanov.

Marx quotes from his cautious paragraph in the French edition of *Capital*, quoted on page 54, limiting the application of *Capital* to Western Europe. Underlining this point, Marx stresses the importance of the survival of the commune in distinguishing Russia from the Western experience:

*In the Western case, then, one form of private property is transformed into another form of private property. In the case of the Russian peasants, however, their communal property, would have to be transformed into private property*

Finally, Marx sums up his own position:

*The analysis in Capital therefore provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might function as such, the harmful influences assailing it on all sides must first be eliminated, and it must then be assured the normal conditions for spontaneous development.*

The following year, when Marx was **really** ill, overcome by the death of his wife, he received a request from Lavrov for a preface for a new Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. The preface was eventually drafted by Engels, but it is signed jointly by the two of them and certainly expresses the views of both. It ends by discussing the prospects for the peasant commune:

*Can the Russian obshchina, a form, albeit heavily eroded, of the primitive communal ownership of the land, pass directly into the higher, communist form of communal ownership? Or must it first go through the same process of dissolution which marks the West's historical development? The only possible answer to this question at the present time is the following: If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two can supplement each other, then present Russian communal land ownership can serve as a point of departure for a communist development.*

A year later, Karl Marx was dead.

Several aspects of Marx's views on Russia at the end of his life are important for this account. Note that in many places he stresses the role of the Tsarist **state** in the rise of capitalism and the destruction of the commune. Seeing the possibility of a Russian revolution, which would only survive in combination with the proletarian revolution in Western Europe, he emphasises the protection of the *obshchina* against this centralised state.

This emphasis should be connected with the lessons he drew from the Paris Commune. He thought it demonstrated the role of a decentralised form of political organisation in the destruction of the bourgeois state and the transition to communism. This must be underlined in view of Plekhanov's later falsification of the meaning of the phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

Also relevant here are the extensive studies Marx made in his last few years of the literature which had begun to appear on primitive societies. Among other problems, these studies centre on the way that the state came into being. (Details of this work are to be found in the so-called *Ethnological Notebooks*.) These were the notes used by Engels as the basis for his *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.)

They are also important from another point of view. 'Marxism' made a great deal of the idea that history moved inexorably through a sequence of 'stages' of social development. This mechanical view has no basis in Marx's work, as his later ideas on Russia and on other 'pre-capitalist' societies confirm. We shall deal with the

Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy* in more detail in Chapter 3, but for the moment let us recall what Marx wrote there - in relation, let us not forget, only to the 'prehistory of human society', not to its 'real, conscious, history': 'In broad outlines, Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic formation of society.'

Meanwhile, in exile in Geneva, Plekhanov and his friends had formed *Osvobozhdeniye Truda* (*Emancipation of Labour*), the first group of Russians to proclaim themselves followers of Marx. These, the former 'Black Repartitionists' (*perdeltsy*), modelled themselves closely on the German Social Democrats, pride of the Second International.

In 1889, Plekhanov spoke at the International Workers Socialist Congress in Paris, the first major gathering of the Second International. Now beginning to be recognised as a leading theoretician of the International, he was at pains to stress the similarity between Russian and Western development.

The old economic foundations of Russia are now undergoing a process of complete disintegration. Our village community, about which so much has been said, even in the socialist press, but which has in fact been a bulwark of Russian absolutism - this much praised community is becoming more and more an instrument of capitalist exploitation in the hands of the rich peasants, while the poor are abandoning the countryside and going to the big towns and industrial centres....

The autocratic government is intensifying this situation with all its might and thus promoting the development of capitalism in Russia. We socialists can only be satisfied at this aspect of its activity, for it is thus preparing its own downfall.')

This speech helps to highlight the fundamental opposition between the conceptions of Karl Marx and those of the 'Marxists'. There is no disagreement about the historical 'facts': capital is developing fast in the domains of the Tsar; the peasant commune is being eroded; peasants are moving into the towns to work in the factories. If he had lived another few years, Marx would have agreed that the decay of this peasant basis had led to the degeneration of the *Narodnaya Volya*-ists. On the one hand, their actions had become increasingly desperate and individualist. On the other, there had grown up that 'legal populism' which later showed itself in the right wing of the Social Revolutionary Party.

But what did these 'facts' mean for Marx in his last years? What mattered for him was that an opportunity was being lost which might make the transition to communism less painful. The upheaval in Russian society implied, he thought, the possibility of imminent revolution. Russian revolutionary socialists must redouble

their efforts to prepare for this revolution, while rural communal property forms still survived, otherwise this chance would not return.

And Plekhanov? As far as he was concerned, the *obshchina* was 'a bulwark of Russian absolutism', which is now 'an instrument of capitalist exploitation in the hands of the rich peasants'. Neither the communal nature of this social form, nor the sufferings of the peasant masses as it disappeared, entered into his theoretical calculations. The socialist revolution is safely postponed for decades. Indeed, since even the overthrow of absolutism was to be accomplished by the Russian working class, this too was a long way off, awaiting the growth of the new class.

No wonder such views were welcomed by Kautsky. It might even be said that such people were attracted to Marx as a result of a misunderstanding. They thought that, like them, he was concerned with the 'explanation' of historical developments with 'interpreting the world' in terms of 'laws'.

They were very keen on the contrast between 'Utopian' and 'Scientific' socialism, But what they meant by 'science' was not what Marx meant at all. They thought science was about the explanation of objects from which the scientist was separated by a safe distance, and which were quite external to him. So for these 'dialectical materialists', socialism was actually a discrete mixture of Utopia and an empirical science of the 'laws of history'. From them, a bureaucratised social democracy learned to combine May Day orations about the communist future with parliamentary skulduggery.

Marx's ideas on Russia, as on many other topics, altered radically as he continually strove to deepen his understanding. Plekhanov, stressing the conflict between 'materialism' and 'the subjective method in sociology', wanted to talk 'scientifically' about the world as it existed. Marx's science started out from the 'active side', the need to 'grasp the object subjectively'. For him, the point was not merely to interpret the world, but to change it.

## Conclusion

We have seen that what we have been brought up to call 'Marxism' took shape only after Marx's death. In the next two chapters, we will see how directly opposed to it were the ideas of Karl Marx. How, then, should we assess the history of those Russian Marxists who fought against the opportunism of the International, breaking with it when it showed its true colours in August 1914? Did the greatness of Lenin and Trotsky really lie in their devotion to 'orthodoxy'?

I believe, on the contrary, that what is important for us today is rather their ability to break with dogma, even if only partially and unsystematically, in the course of revolutionary struggles. Where Plekhanov's 'dialectical and historical materialism' led to a fatalist acceptance that the Russian Revolution had to follow the path of the 'bourgeois revolutions' of the West, they grasped the possibility of an alternative course. (The later policies of Stalin and Bukharin, for example, in China in the 1920s, may be seen as a return to those of Plekhanov in 1905 and 1917.)

Whatever the shortcomings of their theoretical work, those who struggled for Marxism-human beings, not supermen - tried to comprehend the basis for exploitation and oppression, and to organise the working people in the struggle for their liberation. The very notion that it is possible for human beings to revolutionise the way they live was taken more seriously by these people than by anyone in history.

But such a notion raises tremendous problems, problems which subsume and transcend the work of every philosopher worthy of the name that ever lived. The energy, determination and self-sacrifice of the Marxists is a vital part of the history of our time, but it will have been wasted if we cannot look at their struggles with ruthless objectivity. Those who want to honour them must accept the task of comprehending their weaknesses.

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From: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/smith-cyril/works/millenni/smith2a.htm>

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